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A STORY OF REHABILITATION BY A CRIPPLE WHO IS NOT A CRIPPLE

By MICHAEL J. DOWLING,
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I think the chronology of this exhibit started February 17, 1866. He was frozen in a blizzard in Minnesota, December 4, 1880, which was known in Minnesota and throughout the west as the great snow winter. The next important event occurred on the second of October, 1895, when he married a very beautiful girl. He had no difficulty in courting her—and was not the only one. The next event of any great importance is yet to come. It is the writing of the epitaph.

I was fourteen years old, almost fifteen, when I was lost in the blizzard in Minnesota, and up to that time there had not been much in life—since that time there has been a great deal. As a boy and before being overtaken by the blizzard in southwestern Minnesota, I had been making my own way from the time I was ten years old, that is since my mother died. Among other things which I did in preparation for this experiment of reconstruction was to fill the positions of cookee in a lumber camp in Wisconsin, cookee on several Mississippi steamboats plying between St. Paul and St. Louis, water carrier on the Dalrymple Wheat Farm, Cottage Grove, Minnesota, and for a time a kid cowboy on a large ranch, known as Lord White House Ranch in Wyoming, where I learned to shoot, and ride any horse that had four legs. I am willing to put up a wager that there is not a horse on the ranch that I cannot ride today.

The blizzard can best be understood by you—if you have not been in one—by looking up a recent number of the *Saturday Evening Post*, in which the author of “Keeping up with Lizzie” describes “The Making of Mike,” having reference to me. It is the best description of a blizzard that I have ever read.

The blizzard I faced on December 4, 1880, caused the thermometer to register 50° below, and I was out from about seven in the evening until sunrise the next morning. The sun did come up the next morning, and so did I—out of a bed in a straw-pile—and

on getting up and trying to get to a farmhouse, I found that I could not bend my knees and I could not open my hands. The hands were frozen clinched and were like two chunks of clay, but after awhile I limbered up a little, in order to get on my feet and make for the house. I aroused the people. It was rather early even for farmers to get up. The good lady of the house filled a tub with cold water and some other vessels with cold water, and I put both arms up to the elbows and both legs up to the knees into this cold water, and then with this thawing-out process came a splendid opportunity to display courage. It is not a very pleasant occupation, watching the frost freeze the water around your hands and legs and form an ice coating all around as the frost comes out. However, the surgical operation was not performed until several days afterwards—some sixteen days—and the line of demarcation appeared very plainly just above the ankle joints and just about at the wrists of the hands. The operation was performed by the doctors present, on a kitchen table covered with oilcloth in a little family home in the village of Canby. If ever any germs had an opportunity on anyone they had it on me,—but I just grew fat on them. Nothing occurred except healing. Doctor Keen describes (page 16) the testing out of the ligatures to see whether they were ready to be pulled or not—that was the very method the physicians used to find out whether the ligatures were ready to be pulled in my stumps at that time. There were three doctors performing the operation, but in spite of having more than one operating on me I still succeeded in living.

Since that freezing, as I have said before, life has been worth living, and to me it has been a splendid joy—not only in courting the girls and marrying one of them and having a son and three daughters; we have lost the son, but the three daughters are still alive to grace the household. One of them is a sophomore in college, one is a junior in high school and the other is in the seventh grade. I am happy to say that when a man has his legs frozen off—and I believe it is also true when they are shot off—he does not pass on to the next generation the same condition; in fact, I am the only one in our family who has been compelled to buy artificial legs. The girls all take after their mother—they are good looking. We are a happy household. I do not believe that there is ever a thought that enters the mind of the mother or of the girls as to dad being subject to any misfortune or affliction. They think he is just about

the happiest old dad they know of. And he is about the busiest one that I know of—he has to be with as many women folk around the house as he has.

About enjoying life—I think I have enjoyed every moment since the time the doctors got through with me, although there were a few days when I felt really stunned. I was a very active young man, pugnacious, full of fight, and I found myself suddenly with most of the fight cut off—at least, that part which I used to fight with successfully was not in very good shape—so I transferred my thoughts from those things that were gone to what was left.

It occurred to me without any reconstruction campaign on the part of our state university or other place of learning, that there was just one thing for me to do if I did not have any legs or arms, and that was to polish up the machinery above the neck. So I became an omnivorous reader, and—while I may be hurting the feelings of some people somewhere—I must confess I was also a carnivorous eater. I ate heartily, read ravenously, and got as much learning as I possibly could without the aid of teachers. I went to school just as much as I possibly could under the circumstances. You must know that when I was frozen in Minnesota I had neither mother, brother nor sister to look after me or help me. I was the only child in the family. Mother died when I was ten, and father had all he could do to take care of himself, as he was just an ordinary carpenter.

I possessed, at the end of the season of 1880, five head of young cattle and a very intelligent pony with handwriting on his hips. The pony was the last to go. The five head of cattle were sold at once, since I intended to pay my way just as far as I could. The money received from the sale of the five head of cattle, with the little money I had saved up from the season's work, went into buying the necessary medicines. The good people of the town furnished the bandages from worn pillow-slips and sheets and wearing apparel that the ladies tore into strips and wound into rolls. The old lady who was the leader in that work still lives in Canby, and her name is Mrs. Dodge, but she did not "dodge" any work when it came to helping me out. She was there all the time and had a corps of assistants. Therefore, you will understand that I was not very wealthy and not in a position to buy any luxuries, and with that in view I tried to go just as far as I could with the money I

received from the sale of these few head of young stock; but the springtime found me compelled to sell the dearest thing I had on earth—the pony. I cried all night at the time I sold that pony, and I still think of him with tears in my eyes. He was so intelligent and I thought so much of him, but he had to go, and when he had gone the demand still came for more money. I had none—and there is just one thing that happens to a boy or anybody else when that day comes, and that is, the local community assumes the burden. In this case it was the county. The county of Yellow Medicine, Minnesota, had to step in and furnish the money necessary to have me reconstructed and rehabilitated.

The Board of County Commissioners at that time consisted of three men—we now have five. There were two old Norwegians on that board. One of them was an old sailor and the other was an old farmer. Neither one of them had very much book-learning, but both of them had hearts so big their tunics could hardly hold them. The other member and chairman of the board was a Yankee bred in the purple in Maine; he was, in Maine, before going West, at the head of a seminary, and was a man of splendid educational attainments. When the question came up, "What will we do with Mike," this gentleman of excellent intellectual attainments said that he had partially made arrangements with a farmer who had a good home and would take care of him for the rest of his life for two dollars per week. Mike was standing nearby on his knees, with pads made so that he could walk on the floor without hurting his knees—and it was all he could do to contain himself from jumping into the air and landing on top of that professor—but one of the old Norwegian members of the board, Mr. Ole J. Daley, who is still alive and hearty and with whom I had the pleasure of visiting this year, said, "Well, don't let us be in a hurry about this. Mike, what do you think about it?" Well, I smiled—used all the magnetism I possessed—looked into Ole's face and said, "Mr. Daley, if you will give me one year at Carleton College it will never cost this county another cent as long as I live to keep me going." "Well, but," he said, "you can't back that up; that is just your say so." "Well," I said, "I mean it."

The chairman of the board—I do not care to mention his name because he has some sons and daughters who are very good friends of mine and very fine people, and I think it was simply a slip of

judgment at that particular time that caused him to take the position that he did—at any rate, the chairman thought it might be well to think it over until the next day. I got busy—and that is the reason why I got into politics later on—and went to the county auditor, and said, "Henry, you get busy on those two Norwegian members of the board. You are a Norwegian yourself—now you stay by me." "All right," he said, "I'll take them home with me tonight and keep them, and I'll talk to them all night if you want me to." Well, he did good service, at any rate, no matter how he worked it. The next morning the vote stood two to send me to college for one year, and one to send me out on the farm at a cost of two dollars per week for the rest of my life. Well, I went to Carleton and spent the year there. I did not loaf any, I can assure you. I did not have any money to spend on midnight suppers or oyster stews, or anything of that nature, like many of the boys had.

E. J. Weiser, now president of the First National Bank of Fargo, North Dakota, was one of the boys who roomed in the same house I did. He had so much money that I explained to him that I happened to know of a place he could get rid of some of it. He took the hint, and I joined him occasionally at some oyster suppers and other things which I could not afford to buy. I got some second-hand clothes from somewhere—I do not know where they came from—while I was at Carleton, and I had an opportunity offered me to come east and attend a certain school here and become a theological student, but I could not do that, simply because I was asked to make a statement that I would become a minister of the gospel if I would get this particular advantage in the east, and I said that I would be glad to get the education, but I could not accept anybody's money on false pretenses.

I taught school after getting out of Carleton, painted fences, ran a roller-skating rink, sold books by subscription, sold maps—and, in fact, I did everything and anything that would bring in an honest dollar—and I was not ashamed to be seen doing the painting by the roadside and have the rest of the boys go by and say, "You are putting more paint on your clothes than you are on the fence." This painting job was naturally hard work, but it was lots of fun teaching. I enjoyed teaching very much. I taught for seven years—three years in the country, when I was promoted to a graded school, and the last three years I was superintendent of a high school,

the first high school in Renville County, and that is the county in which I now live. I also started a paper, ran a weekly paper a number of years while teaching school, and did a number of other things. Besides running a paper and teaching school, among other things I did was to get into politics. I stirred up one of the large financial institutions of our state to such an extent that it became one of the greatest failures in the history of the northwest. I made charges against it through the columns of my small country paper, verified same by examining their books at their own request, and then published the verification. That got me into politics. I was made assistant to the chief clerk of the House of Representatives the first session, and the next time I was chief clerk of the House of Representatives, and liking the work so well and thinking that I ought to have the vote next time, I became a candidate for member of the House, and was elected by a comfortable majority. I was also elected Speaker of the House, it being the first time that a new member had occupied that position, and also against the wishes of the combinations that usually controlled. There happened to be in that House enough new members in the state to make a comfortable majority, and all I did was to go to these men or write to them and say to them, "We have a majority and what is the use of letting the old fellows run the House?"

To marry is to take on trouble sometimes, but in my case I want to "fess up" that with the exception of some suffragette work that Mrs. Dowling does, we have gotten along very nicely. We have lived very happily, and she never thinks of the artificial legs any more than I do. In fact, I think—if I may be pardoned from getting away from this personal talk just a moment—the trouble with most crippled men is that they think about those things that are gone and cannot be brought back. They keep their minds on what is gone, instead of diverting their minds to what they have left and making an effort to develop what there is left.

I say I get a great deal of pleasure out of life—in one way, by driving an automobile. My family for years have toured the country in our own car and I have been the driver. I have driven to Yellowstone Park, over the famous Yellowstone Trail, and back along the great Northern Railroad. We were gone seven weeks on that trip, and when we got back I weighed more than I did when we started—but had considerable less money. Two

years ago this last summer we drove to Duluth in our car. I believe in taking the girls and my wife every place I go if I can do it conveniently, especially when going for pleasure. We drove to Duluth and shipped the car to Buffalo via the Lakes, and then drove from Buffalo through New York State to western Massachusetts, to my old home. I was born in the Berkshire Hills of poor but Irish parents. I drove this car through the Berkshire Hills down to Boston, then to Plymouth, and from Plymouth we went back to Boston, followed the ride of Paul Revere and visited the beaches along the coast to Portland, thence from Portland to Poland Springs and from Poland Springs—after filling up with that splendid water—we went over to Bartlett, New Hampshire, on the ideal tour route, and through the Green Mountains and White Mountains back by a different road to Buffalo. After visiting Niagara Falls, we re-shipped from Buffalo to Duluth and took in the Iron Mines and the new Steel City, reaching home after weeks of enjoyment, with the girls learning more than they had learned in the year that they had spent in school and coming back filled with energy. The youngest is ten and the oldest is nineteen years old, and I will put them up against any boy of their size for a scrap. They are perfect specimens of womanhood and able to hold their own in any position.

I believe if I say nothing else in this article than that education is made too easy in most cases for boys and girls, I will have said a great deal. The teacher takes on all the work and makes a nervous wreck of herself, rather than put obstacles in the way of boys and girls in order to develop that boy and girl. Most boys and girls go to school much earlier than they should. My girls did not go to school until they were eight years of age, and the oldest one became the valedictorian of her class in high school and finished a year ahead of those who had started much earlier than she had.

Now, for a suggestion in this work—if you do not watch out you are going to do so many things for the crippled soldier that when he gets back home he will not feel the need of exercising his own muscles or his own faculties. You must put him in a position where he has to do the work. I know it is good for a man in that condition, because I have gone through the mill. There was no one to help me in any way, shape or form; and while I have said that a man is worth \$100,000 a year—if he can make it honestly—above

his neck, and, perhaps, may not be worth over \$1.50 per week below, I have not been able to earn that much money in a year, I must confess, but I am looking forward to reaching that point before I pass on; and in the meantime when anybody tells you that because a man loses a leg or two of them or an arm or both of them he is a cripple, just refer him to me and I will take care of him. The finest looking men in the world may have more cause to regret things that they have done and they may not enjoy life as much as the man who is despised as a cripple, because he has lost a leg or an arm. There is no such thing as a cripple, if the mind is right.